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Theatrical Revolutions and Domestic Reforms: Space and Ideology in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and Austen's *Mansfield Park*

ROSA MUCIGNAT

I

At first glance, nothing appears more distant from the monumental *Meister*, with its complex intellectual framework and great philosophical debates, than Austen's minute account of petty cruelties and triumphant female virtue in the Mansfield household. Yet chronology, if nothing else, draws the two novels together. Goethe published *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* between 1795 and 1796, although the first five chapters are based on an earlier manuscript known as *Theatralische Sendung* (1777–1785); the date for Austen's *Mansfield Park* is 1814, that is, a year before the end of the Napoleonic wars, in a period of European history that brought immense and violent changes, whose consequences make themselves felt in the concerns and plot developments of Goethe's and Austen's narratives. Although neither of the novels includes direct references to these extraordinary events, it can be argued that both Goethe and Austen find indirect ways to evoke the sense of transformation and upheaval that had taken hold of Europe at the time of their writing, and that they do so by means of the same image: the theatre.

Without wishing to understate the complexity of Goethe's work, its far-reaching synthesis and symbolic density, or, conversely, transcend the premises and the intentions of Austen's novel, this article aims at presenting a comparative reading of these two texts, which concentrates on their use of two specific spatial figures: the theatre and the house. This article will concern itself with how Goethe and Austen use the experience of play-acting to investigate issues of order and authority, and

how, in both novels, the theatrical episodes are presented as disruption of established domestic contexts, as miniature revolutions on the space of the everyday. It will also show how the exciting but dangerously subversive experience of the theatre is contrasted with the model of a measured, gradual reform, rewarded in the end with the conquest of the perfect home. My aim is to clarify the way in which the dialectical relation, existing in both novels, between freewheeling formation years and settled adult life is reflected on two spatial paradigms, the theatre and the house, which are also associated with the conflicting principles of revolution and reform.

Franco Moretti says it with one of his sharp phrases: 'the *Bildungsroman* narrates how the French Revolution could have been avoided'.¹ Difficult as it is to pin down Goethe's complex attitude toward the revolutionary efforts, critics tend to agree that the reaction to what was happening in France and elsewhere has played a decisive part in his decision to go back to his 'old novel' and rework it into the *Lehrjahre*.² Admittedly, the meaning Goethe assigns to the theatre in this context is hard to define. On the one hand, and especially in the *Sendung*, theatre remains for Wilhelm an exciting playground, where he imagines the true nobility of art prevailing against bourgeois limitations and a materialistic world view. On the other, the *Lehrjahre* fully exposes the illusoriness of Wilhelm's 'theatrical mission', by showing how, after the initial fervour has died out, the wandering life along with the troupe of actors becomes fruitless and even wearisome, and effectively hinders Wilhelm's harmonious personal growth. But as the ultimate failure of the theatrical enterprise was already envisaged in the *Sendung*, the passage to the *Lehrjahre* is not simply the result of a progressive withdrawal into conservatism on Goethe's part. Rather, it brings to the fore a tension that lies at the heart of the novel since its earliest formulation, that between order and disorder, individual freedom and universal harmony, the excitement of adventure and the contentment of a settled life.

'Leben und Weben ist hier, aber nicht Ordnung und Zucht' (there is life and movement here, but no order or discipline), recites one of the *Venetianische Epigramme* Goethe wrote in 1790.³ The same disparity he perceived with displeasure between Italy and Germany, or at least between Venice and Weimar, also separates the exotic sensuality of the theatre for which Wilhelm falls, and the regulated wellbeing of home that he finally settles for. And if we add a further level to this opposition, we can link Southern theatrics to revolutionary chaos, anarchy, and the violent overthrow of authority, while the Apollonian restraint of the

Germans would correspond to the enlightened realm of harmony and order Goethe was striving to create in Weimar, and Wilhelm finds ready for him in Natalie's neoclassical villa at the end of the *Lehrjahre*.

Goethe's concept of classicism as embodied by Natalie's villa consists in an aesthetically pleasing environment, where a selected group of people share their life in useful and noble pursuits, and social and personal boundaries are arranged in such a way that can be accepted by the individual and consequently benefits the community. As Giuliano Baioni has it, 'classicism for Goethe becomes the attempt to stop history at the level of tolerance and *Geselligkeit* which characterized the eighteenth century'.⁴ Goethe saw the process triggered by the Terror in France bring war, institutional chaos and civil strife all over Europe, destroying what he considered the basis of eighteenth-century civilization: sense, the idea of an interiorized moral law, and the faith in an organic human community. It is little wonder, then, that Goethe does not participate in the Jacobin enthusiasms of other European intellectuals, and that the hero of his novel opts out of the theatrical plan, renouncing the moral and material disorder of the acting life.

A connection between theatre, disorder and forms of resistance to an established authority is also made by Austen in *Mansfield Park*. Marilyn Butler has called *Mansfield Park* 'the most visibly ideological of Jane Austen's novels',⁵ and placed it in the category of the novels about female education, alongside Hannah Moore's and Maria Edgeworth's, which promote conservative moral values and contain elements of the anti-Jacobin discourse that dominated the British public scene from the mid-1790s.⁶ Accusations of immorality and political radicalism were levelled especially against the growing vogue for German literature, which becomes associated with subversion, intellectualism, and an impious belief in human self-assertion, epitomized by figures like Schiller's Karl Moor and Goethe's Faust. Although August von Kotzebue was known in Germany as a popular dramatist with a conservative leaning, considered in the context of British anti-Jacobinism, Austen's choice of a German play seems directed at emphasizing that the theatricals are a defiant and illicit scheme, implying again the equation of theatre with subversion and the stumbling block on one's path toward self-reform.⁷

In fact, it is fair to say that the main theme of *Mansfield Park* is what Fanny Price calls, in reference to Mary Crawford, 'the effect of education' (211) and, like Goethe, the aim Austen sets for her protagonist is the foundation of a new home at Mansfield Park, culminating in the

restoration of its placid neoclassical perfection after all the remains of the theatricals are expelled. At the end of the *Lehrjahre*, two of the female figures more closely involved with theatre and irregular life are removed, after Mariane's death has been ascertained and Mignon safely shut in her mausoleum. *Mansfield Park*'s Mary Crawford and Maria Bertram meet a scarcely better fate, buried away in social shame, and it is upon these more or less figurative dispatches that both houses continue and prosper.

However, both in Austen and in Goethe the criticism of play-acting is not absolute, and a distinction is carefully made between high theatre as a valuable art and theatricals of the lower order, which indulge in vulgar and narcissistic pleasures. This double standard is evident in the *Lehrjahre*, where Wilhelm's inspired disquisitions on Shakespeare's natural genius – whom the Tower, through Jarno, recommend him to study – are opposed to Philine's distasteful small talk.⁸ Moreover, Wilhelm's desire to act can be interpreted, as Dieter Borchmeyer has done, as a metaphor of his aspiration to elevate himself from the bourgeois condition of being defined by one's work to the higher position of the nobleman, whose only task is *scheinen*, 'to appear' or 'represent' his own personality in society. Of course, Wilhelm's experience of professional acting is far from this ideal, hence his withdrawal from the theatre.⁹

In *Mansfield Park*, Edmund makes it clear that he does not oppose theatre as such, and indeed admits he would travel far to see 'good hardened real acting' but disdains 'the raw efforts of those who have not been bred to the trade'. He then explains that 'gentlemen and ladies' make bad actors because they are encumbered by their sense of 'education and decorum'.¹⁰ He is proved wrong on this one, for the Mansfield troupe, himself included, will show very little of the moral scruples he attributed to them. Wilhelm sees the discrepancy between his ideal way of living and the gritty theatre business, Edmund instead argues that theatre is best left to only one sort of people, the ungentlemanly, but they both come to the same conclusion: there is something about play-acting that makes its pursuit unworthy.

One of the reasons for this, I argue, is the affinity both novels postulate between theatre and revolution. The idea is not new: in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke remarks that revolutionaries have a liking for *coups de théâtre* and always look for 'a great change of scene; there must be a magnificent stage effect; there must be a grand spectacle to rouse the imagination'. The English, instead, prefer 'a manly, moral,

regulated liberty', even if to some it seems 'flat and vapid'.¹¹ Burke contrasts uniform and carefully planned change to violent upturns, and a safe and steady domestic routine to the excitement of the stage.

Austen, especially in her later novels, develops a social vision very close to Burke's, centred on the themes of community and customs, and on the necessity of maintaining continuity within a natural process of improvement.¹² And although no mention of Burke is made in Goethe's writings, there are evident analogies in their political thought: they both condemned the violent turn of the French Revolution, were sceptical about the penchant for political theories and purely abstract ideals of the Jacobins, and valued instead a view of human society as a vital organism that grows and evolves regularly according to its own internal dynamics.¹³

An emphasis on organic growth processes, an idea Goethe derived from Herder's reflections on language and human nature, is most clearly present in Goethe's naturalistic writings, especially those composed after the Italian journey of 1786–1788 and his participation in the Franco-Prussian war of 1792–1793. It is precisely in the 1790s that Goethe returns to the *Sturm-und-Drang* concept of organic growth, to reassess it on the basis of these dramatic experiences, which, as Goethe expresses in a biographical note, 'shattered all sentimentality' in him and demanded a dispassionate examination of the natural world, aimed at reconstructing the systematic plan that underpins the whole creation and regulates its continuous, gradual metamorphosing.¹⁴

As for Austen's Fanny Price, she also does her share of naturalistic enthusiasm and, like Goethe in the botanical garden of Palermo, is inspired by the lush variety of the parson's shrubbery, to declare: 'One cannot fix one's eyes on the commonest natural production without finding food for a rambling fancy'. In her musings we even find trace of the concept of natural metamorphosis, a theory Goethe had long studied, as the attainment of multiplicity in a perfectly integrated whole. Considering the example of the evergreen plants, she exclaims: 'When one thinks of it, how astonishing a variety of nature!' and how amazing, she adds, 'that the same soil and the same sun should nurture plants differing in the first rule and law of their existence' (164). As a further example of vegetal virtues, trees are often images of continuity and flourishing tradition for Austen, and indicate the economical and moral wellbeing of an estate: in this sense, Mr Rushworth's intention of cutting down the avenue of old English oaks at Sotherton forebodes his loss of dignity.

Although Austen's discourse is considerably less equipped with philosophical insights than Goethe's, she does share his belief that organic growth, gradual reform, and *Bildung* represent the idea of constructing on stable foundations, allowing the positive qualities present *in nuce* to emerge and blossom. Rather than turbulent changes of scene, mindless demolition, and uprooting, the eighteenth-century Tory Austen and Goethe the bridge-building polymath always choose the ordered quiet of a well-managed, substantial, comfortable home.

2

Having thus established the terms of the correlation between theatre and the violent transformative action of revolution, as opposed to the gradual reforming process favoured by Goethe and Austen, I will first look at how the two authors incorporate subversive theatre-making in their narratives of education, and then at their representation of the ideal condition that is realized in the home after the theatres have been dismantled.

The *Lehrjahre* opens in the dressing room of the young performer Mariane, where she receives Wilhelm after her evening show is over. From this scene of charming playfulness, the narrator takes us instantly to the following morning at old Meister's breakfast table, where Wilhelm must hear his mother's plea not to disturb their domestic quiet with his foolish passion for theatre (11; Bk. 1, Ch. 2). A sharp antithesis is set from the very beginning between the unrestrained pleasures of the theatrical world and the bleak scenario of his father's house. We then learn that this is a new house, built by Wilhelm's father with the money obtained from the sale of a precious art collection put together by his grandfather. It is a grand mansion filled with heavy furniture in the fashionable rococo style, but to the young Wilhelm it is empty and soulless because it has nothing of the snug crookedness and the peculiar appearance of the old one, which housed an impressive display of ancient and Italian art assembled by Wilhelm's grandfather according to the idiosyncratic criteria and educational purposes of eighteenth-century classicism.¹⁵

Bereft of the formative aesthetic stimulus provided by the collection, Wilhelm clings to the only instance of creativity allowed in his father's house: the puppet theatre. On one Christmas day a puppet show is performed in the drawing room, with unforeseen consequences on Wilhelm's imagination: he observes the rigid boundaries of the house being blurred and the utilitarian arrangement of the space transformed into something strange and surprising:

[Die Tür] eröffnete sich; allein nicht wie sonst zum Hin- und Widerlaufen, der Eingang war durch eine unerwartete Festlichkeit ausgefüllt. Es baute sich ein Portal in die Höhe, das von einem mystischen Vorhang verdeckt war. (13; Bk. I, Ch. 2)

The door opened, but not as formerly, to let us pass and repass; the entrance was occupied by an unexpected show. Within it rose a porch, concealed by a mysterious curtain.¹⁶

The wide-eyed expectation, the glittering and jingling objects glimpsed behind the swaying curtain, and, above all, the sense of a magic transformation of the everyday-life space are imprinted on Wilhelm's mind and mark the beginning of his fascination for the theatre.

His father's house is a well-ordered and sober household, dominated by the stern frown of the paterfamilias, which scarcely allows for genuine enjoyment and real communication between family members. Guests are seldom invited, and all gatherings become elaborate and ceremonious functions. Every object of the house is described as heavy, dark, and immovable:

In seinem Hause mußte alles solid und massiv sein, der Vorrat reichlich, das Silbergeschirr schwer, das Tafelservice kostbar. [...] Sein Haushalt ging einen gelassenen und einförmigen Schritt, und alles, was sich darin bewegte und erneuerte, war gerade das, was niemanden einigen Genuß gab. (41; Bk. I, Ch. 11)

In his house he would have all things solid and massive; his stores must be copious and rich; all his plates must be heavy; the furniture of his table costly. [...] The economy of his house went on at a settled, uniform rate: and everything that moved or had place in it was just what yielded no one any real enjoyment. (I, 55)

Moreover, Wilhelm's father entertains a severe idea of education, opposed to the aesthetic *Bildung* envisaged by his own father the collector, based on the principle that children's joy must be marred and their merits diminished, so as not to stimulate their presumption. In this stifling atmosphere, Wilhelm grows restless and discontented, and develops a special receptiveness to the occasional irregularities and flaws of the well-oiled housekeeping machine, what Wilhelm calls 'Ritzen und Löcher' (crevices and holes), like a door left ajar, a key standing in its lock, or the most conspicuous novelty of the puppet-show.

If the house is solid and burdensome, everything connected with theatre is tiny, light, and sparkling, from the puppets in their colourful costumes to the waterfalls of tin, the paper roses, all the tawdry, flimsy devices of Mariane's theatre company. Yet lightness is not only the opposite of weight, but also the opposite of profundity, steadiness, and order. Broad-minded as he might be, Wilhelm still cannot help

but wonder, with mixed desire and disgust, at the jumble and dirt of Mariane's bedroom, where her stage costumes lie scattered everywhere, along with music scores, underwear, make-up, and chamber pots. In this anarchic paradise of soil and sequins he revels, coming at last to feel 'einen Reiz, den er in seiner stattlichen Prunkordnung niemals empfunden hatte' (59; Bk. I, Ch. 15), 'a charm which the proud pomp of his own habitation never had communicated' (I, 76).

Later, in Book Three, when Wilhelm has already left home and his bookkeeping career to join the touring actors, we are again presented with a 'theatricalized' house, when the troupe are invited to perform at the Count's castle. Once there, they realize that there are two castles: one is the modern *Residenz* of the Count, glowing with candles and burning fires, but behind it stands the abandoned Gothic mansion, a sort of ghostly double of the new palace, where the actors are lodged. Once the seat of stern armoured knights, the ancient *Schloß* is now appropriated by the frolicsome actors, soon joined by other marginal inhabitants of the castle, soldiers and courtiers, who all together set up an alternative community, where the rules of etiquette are suspended and repressed sexual energies find an irresistible outlet, among role-playing and masquerades. The old castle is transformed into a scene of confusion:

Junge Offiziere gingen aus und ein, spaßten nicht eben auf das feinste mit den Aktrizen, hatten die Akteure zum besten und vernichteten die ganze kleine Polizeiordnung [...]. Man jagte sich durch die Zimmer, verkleidete sich, versteckte sich, [...] und es schien, als wenn das ganze alte Schloß vom wütenden Heere besessen sei. (163; Bk. III, Ch. 4)

Young officers went out and in; they jested not in the most modest fashion with the actresses; made game of the actors; and annihilated the whole system of police [...]. The people ran chasing one another through the rooms, they changed clothes, they disguised themselves. [...] It seemed as if the old Castle had been altogether given up to an infuriate host. (I, 196)

Like the puppet theatre, which was erected in the transitional space of a doorway, the space designed for the theatre performance in the Count's palace is a large hall, which, though belonging to the old Castle, is linked by a gallery to the new one. It is a passageway from one world to the other, which allows the theatrical disease to spread into the apparently dignified ambience of the court. In reality, it soon becomes clear that the private chambers of the aristocrats are ruled by vanity, envy, and petty rivalries not unlike those troubling the precarious community of the actors.

Theatre sneaks into a too orderly and oppressive household, and is seized on by the domestic insurgents as a way to elude rules and find

the gratification and freedom they desire. It is a persistent failing of the established order, that is, the aesthetic defectiveness and rigidity of Meister's house and the moral hollowness of the Count's court, which causes its subjects to be prone to the contagion of unruly freedom and disorder. The metaphor of revolution as an illness that could be communicated from one country or social group to another was a common pattern of interpretation in Goethe's time. For Burke, England had to quarantine herself against the plague that was ravishing France. 'The contagion of liberty' is a concept introduced by the historian Bernard Bailyn in 1967 to describe the expansion of concepts of right and freedom developed during the American Revolution to further attacks on slavery and institutionalized religion. Carlyle too, in his history of the French Revolution of 1837, uses the idea of revolution as a social pathology, a sort of nervous disorder that spreads through mutual emotional response.¹⁷

A similar notion based on medical theories was also applied in the eighteenth century to what has been termed 'theatre mania', and in the last decades of the century studies were produced that identified an excessive penchant for the theatre in young men as a psychological problem that required medical treatment.¹⁸ The theatre's revolutionary potential, and its capacity to affect and transform mind and bodies of the spectators have been known since Aristotle and his definition of tragedy based on the feelings it arouses (pity, fear, and *catharsis*). A similar concept of the impact theatre has on emotions and moral judgements also underlies late-ancient and medieval assumptions about play-acting, which are still alive in Fanny's suspicion of the theatricals.¹⁹ The *Lehrjahre* repeatedly refer to the pathological nature of Wilhelm's stage-struck condition and to the Tower Society's plans to cure him: as medical theories prescribed, the patient's whims are tolerated and encouraged until they have run their course and naturally fade away, and the initiation ceremony marks Wilhelm's healing from both the theatrical intoxication and his outbursts of rebellion. Curiously however, the Tower is not immune from theatricals and the ritual for initiation, as revealed by Jarno, is in itself a relic of its members' youthful fondness of mystery and role-playing, which the initiated now view with a smile (548; Bk. VIII, Ch. 5).

In keeping with the medical metaphor, when Austen's Mr Yates arrives at Mansfield, he brings with him an 'infection' that spreads quickly, given that the 'itch for acting' is 'strong among young people'.²⁰ Like Goethe, Austen uses the metaphor of epidemics to characterize

theatre as an infective agent that sneaks in and multiplies within a social organism, all the more easily if the social body is already debilitated, as it is with Mansfield's headless government when Sir Thomas is away on his Antiguan estate. Sir Thomas's management of the house closely resembles the impassive severity of Wilhelm's father. The young Fanny, just arrived from a crammed townhouse in Portsmouth, is paralyzed by his 'grave looks' and by 'the grandeur of the house', its large stately rooms filled with precious and fragile objects (12). Sir Thomas is a figure of authority, respected but hardly loved by his own children, who yearn for amusements and social engagements and are instead confined to 'sameness and gloom' and 'a sombre family-party rarely enlivened' (153).

The theatricals come then as a refreshing diversion from domestic boredom, and especially as an occasion to unsettle and rearrange the restrictive boundaries of domestic life at Mansfield. As announced in the improvement plans for Sotherton, the Crawfords and the Bertrams are keen on pulling down walls and revolutionizing the traditional organization of space: there, they proposed to cut down the venerable avenue of oak trees and to remove all the fences, iron palisades and gates that block the view and impede movement on the rigid parterre of Sotherton's grounds. The same impetus for renovation manifests itself in the episode of the theatricals at Mansfield Park, which, besides questions of modesty and decorum, appear to be reprehensible because of their effects on the house itself. This is immediately remarked on by Edmund, who protests against play-acting first of all because, he says, 'it would be taking liberties with my father's house in his absence' (100).

In spite of all assurances, the preparations involve greater confusion and greater expense than predicted, and result in major alterations to the appearance and use of the domestic space, and especially of the personal domains of the patriarch. Under the supervision of Tom Bertram, the elegantly dissipated heir to Mansfield, the company sets up a proper theatre with stage, curtain, and painted sceneries in the billiard room, the preserve of respectable and old-fashioned country gentlemen like Sir Thomas.²¹ The billiard-room, says Tom Bertram, 'is the very room for a theatre, [...] and my father's room will be an excellent green-room' (99). Showing her taste for the farcical, Austen takes the profanation even further: nothing less than Sir Thomas's private studio, which he calls his 'own dear room' (142), is finally appropriated by the acting party, emptied of its furniture, and transformed into the actors' boudoir.

The contagion of theatre spreads as far as Fanny's attic, her retreat from the theatrical chaos downstairs, which temporarily becomes Mary

and Edmund's rehearsal room. And it is precisely Mary, the novel's malicious tongue, who amusedly remarks on the general impropriety of the party's conduct at Mansfield, and, in particular, on the offence caused by their deliberate misuse of space and objects:

There – very good school-room chairs, not made for a theatre, I dare say; more fitted for little girls to sit and kick their feet against when they are learning a lesson. What would your governess and your uncle say to see them used for such a purpose? Could Sir Thomas look in upon us just now, he would bless himself, for we are rehearsing all over the house. (133)

Theatre causes a reversal of order, in truth, a small-scale revolution: in the old school-room, once a place of innocence and learning, the amateur actors mimic their real-life flirtations, arousing in themselves and the others a flow of ungovernable, disruptive passions.²²

But just before the crisis ensues, a few moments before the final rehearsals, Sir Thomas is announced at the door. Actors and public become suddenly motionless, terrified, in a grand scene that recalls Odysseus's arrival among the suitors. Lady Bertram plays Penelope, hastily declaring that 'her own time had been irreproachably spent during his absence; she had done a great deal of carpet work and made many yards of fringe' (140). Sir Thomas, who had already been compared to a 'heathen hero', offering his own children in sacrifice to the gods on his return (86), discloses himself first to his faithful old butler, a new Eumaeus. And of course, his return marks the end of feasting and merrymaking, and the expulsion of all intruders (the Crawfords).

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that Goethe had resumed his study of Homer while he was working on the *Lehrjahre*,²³ and incorporated several references to the *Odyssey* in the new *Meister*: following the ancient convention, Goethe inserted the famous opening scene *in medias res*, with the old Barbara listening at the window. Jane Curran points out that Wilhelm, like Odysseus at Alcinous' court, is moved to tears by the reference to his own grief he detects in the Harper's song.²⁴ In general, Wilhelm's peregrinations take the shape of a miniature *Odyssey*, a sequence of encounters and interconnected episodes in which continuous temptations divert the hero from his route. Philine is often described as a temptress with a siren's allure: her 'frevelhaften Reize' (107; Bk. II, Ch. 15), her 'disgraceful and wanton charms', keep Wilhelm from proceeding on his business trip, and her racy song about the pleasures of the night arouses him (317; Bk. V, Ch. 10); and the Baroness is said to have the powers and appetites of a modern-day Circe (177; Bk.

III, Ch. 8). But the most beautiful analogy is that, as David Roberts has it, ‘Wilhelm Meister’s odyssey ends in the homecoming’²⁵ – and so does Fanny Price’s.

Going back to *Mansfield Park*, the insurgents are caught unawares by the unforeseen return of the king, and easily vanquished. A process of restoration then begins, which involves both the reestablishment of an autocratic domestic regime, and, more literally, repairing the alterations and damages caused to the house by the theatrical venture. As Mrs Grant explains to Mary, Sir Thomas’s authority means that he ‘keeps everybody in their place’ (127), and this is what he sets about doing as soon as he arrives at Mansfield, starting from an immediate closing-of-the-theatres:

He had to reinstate himself in all the wonted concerns of his Mansfield life, to see his steward and bailiff – to examine and compute [...]; he had also set the carpenter to work in pulling down what had been so lately put up in the billiard room, and given the scene painter his dismissal [...]. He was in hopes that another day or two would suffice [sic] to wipe away every outward memento of what had been, even to the destruction of every unbound copy of ‘Lovers’ Vows’ in the house, for he was burning all that met his eye. (149)

The implements of the revolt have been removed, the forbidden texts burned, and the ringleaders of the protest punished with exile. Now Fanny can carry out her plan of reform for Mansfield: the company is downsized, corrupting influences are exposed and driven out (Mrs Norris) or mend their ways (Tom Bertram), while Sir Thomas is gradually brought to accept a limitation of his powers, to renounce his unreasonable despotism and comply, as it seems, to the sane principles of English parliamentary monarchy, accepting Fanny as the moral successor to the Mansfield heirloom.

3

As I have said above, both the *Lehrjahre* and *Mansfield Park* end with a homecoming. But the home to which Fanny and Wilhelm return is not the one they had left when they embarked on, or were pulled along, the theatrical adventure. While repudiating the revolutionary methods of theatre, Goethe and Austen do recognize the necessity of change, and in their novels they propose a model of reform based on the ideas of metamorphosis and harmonious variety they both saw in the realm of nature. After the theatrical furore has eased off, characters are shuffled around and locations change, and, finally, they are directed to a new

spatial construction, which contains everything they want to retain of their past, and, potentially, all that they can imagine for their future, like a well-designed family home.

In line with the assumption that homemaking is a woman's thing, Wilhelm marries into Natalie's ready-made residence, while Fanny, the quiet self-developer, has to improve Mansfield for herself. She is the architect of Mansfield's domestic reform and not among the aggressive improvers with their radical and destructive alterations. We must turn again to Burke, since, as Alistair Duckworth has noted, it is in his *Reflections* that we find the imagery of improvement used to illustrate the excesses of the revolution, and, conversely, the careful amelioration of the estate as a metaphor for English reformism. 'We [the English]', says Burke, 'found these old institutions, on the whole, favourable to morality and discipline; and we thought they were susceptible of amendment, without altering the ground' (264). Duckworth sees in *Mansfield Park* the final realization of this metonymical association, which is constantly present in Austen's novels before *Persuasion*, of 'state' with 'estate', where 'the pre-existing structures of morality and religion' are materially inscribed in a specific spatial setting, and are given a tangible form in the fabric of the house, the outline of its rooms, and the prospects of its grounds.²⁶ Duckworth compares this infusion of cultural and ethical significance into space to the shamanic practices of Bororo Indians, but, without going this far, it will suffice here to set it side by side with Goethe's *Lehrjahre*.

One difference between our two novelists and the Bororo, I suppose, is that the spatial arrangement Goethe and Austen invest with positive values is not an inheritance received from past generations to which no change should be made. They both attach scarce value to the pre-theatrical (or pre-revolutionary) domestic strictures, and explicitly condemn the treatment to which Wilhelm, and to a larger extent Fanny, have been subjected in their childhood homes. Moreover, the succession to the reformed houses, Mansfield Park and Natalie's villa, is entrusted not to the legitimate beneficiary but to an outsider (Wilhelm) and a social inferior (Fanny), on the basis of personal merit only—although Wilhelm's merits can be only potential ones. Neither Goethe nor Austen are advocates of conservation, and their narratives do not express an absolute disapproval of the carnivalesque reversal of the theatre and the free experimentation with space and self-identity that it enables.

But just as Goethe loved and admired Italy, so long as he could go back to the German 'Ordnung und Zucht', so the possibility of another

world, the space of disorder, creativity, and sexual freedom is enticing and alluring only on condition that it does not last forever. Theatre and the subversion that comes with it are but a transitory phase in the process of *Bildung*, a flawed strategy of advancement which must be abandoned. In the conclusion, subversive tensions are neutralized and an ideal order is established, whose material manifestation in the world of the novel is nothing but a wealthy and wisely managed conjugal abode. This is a common way of proceeding in Austen, as each heroine of her novels (including *Persuasion*'s Anne Elliot) is in the end rewarded with a comfortable position in a place that fulfils all her expectations and is 'as dear to her heart, and as thoroughly perfect in her eyes' as Mansfield Park is to Fanny – although, at least as long as Edmund's older brother lives, she has to make do with the Parsonage, a sort of appendix, 'within the view and patronage' of the great house (372).

The same feeling of reassurance and gratification grows in Wilhelm when he realizes that the people he has met, in apparent casual fashion, during his travels are all linked to Natalie's family and that the house hosts the very art collection he used to admire as a child. He then exclaims: 'So bin ich denn in dem Hause des würdigen Oheims! Es ist kein Haus, es ist ein Tempel, und Sie sind die würdige Priesterin, ja der Genius selbst' (519; BK. VIII, Ch. 3) ('I am here then in your worthy uncle's house! It is no house, it is a temple, and you are the priestess, nay, the Genius of it'; II, p. 99). The patchy and confused knowledge Wilhelm gathered during his theatrical experiences appears reordered and articulated, also in relation to Wilhelm's past, in the harmonious architecture and orderly disposition of this 'temple'.

The collection reappears here as an element charged with great significance, which can be connected again to the current political debate. The French Revolution transformed princely galleries into public art museums, appropriated aristocratic and ecclesiastical collections and rearranged them according to new scientific principles, to educate the new citizens and serve the collective good of the state. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill explains, 'in the place of intensely personal, private collections housed in the palaces of princes and the homes of the scholars', a new specific space for the collections is established, which has more to do with the Foucauldian notion of modern 'disciplinary' society than with the autonomous and enriching aesthetic experience envisioned by Goethe.²⁷ But the collection of Wilhelm's grandfather is neither dispersed nor nationalized. Instead, it is accommodated in the larger and more elegant rooms of Natalie's villa, together with many

other treasures that reflect and dialogue with one another, composing a complex but unitary meaning, which reconciles even death, as in the allegorical marbles of the 'Saale der Vergangenheit'. Also in this instance of spatial organization, the collection, Goethe rejects what he considers the dehumanizing universalism of revolutionary ideology and conceives in its place an ideal structure where the values of the past can be incorporated with the lively energies of the present and brought to perfection.

It should be noted that Fanny is a collector, too. She has taken possession of the old school room, and stored her personal effects there: her plants, her drawings, her books, and the various discarded objects she has salvaged through the years from what Mansfield had cast aside. Both the assembling of the collection and the appropriation of the space are described as a gradual, imperceptible progress similar to a natural phenomenon: 'Gradually', says the narrator, 'as her value for the comforts of it increased, she had added to her possessions, and spent more of her time there; and having nothing to oppose her, had so naturally and so artlessly worked herself into it, that it was now generally admitted to be hers' (119). The room and the collection are Fanny's private space, which she has created of her own free accord, over time, to suit her own taste and needs. In her little cosmos, Fanny is free to employ herself in reading and working, and to ponder on her conduct; and it is to this silent and freezing retreat that she ascends 'after any thing unpleasant *below*'.²⁸ There, 'every thing [is] a friend', everything reflects and reinforces her personal identity, and serves the purposes of her self-made *Bildung*, for, unlike Wilhelm, Fanny is alone in her pursuit of self-knowledge. Her itinerary is not guided by the Humanist ideals of the Tower, but rather it is dominated by the harrowing moral dilemmas and the existential solitude of the Christian *vox clamantis in deserto*.

For some critics, the position of Austen's novel in relation to the *Bildungsroman* largely depends on the degree of dynamism we assign to its main character, and in large part on the attitude of responsiveness or demurral toward the theatricals we attribute to her. Although she concedes that *Mansfield Park* is 'the Austen novel that most resembles a Bildungsroman', Ruth Yeazell claims that it is also 'the novel least open to real development and change', and it 'strenuously emphasizes the line between the in and the out, the acceptable and the unclean'.²⁹ Penny Gay, on the contrary, argues for Fanny's 'education in the theatre', a process whereby she learns to be 'looked at', becomes aware of sexual desire, her own and other people's, and experiments with its effects, primarily

through her dealings with Henry Crawford.³⁰ Susan Fraiman, in her study of female novels of education, insists that novels like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* do not pose 'a fiction of individual self-making' comparable to their male counterparts, but suggest that becoming a woman involves deindividualization and the loss of liberty.³¹ It seems to me that the problem has less to do with Austen, and more with the definition of the *Bildungsroman* in general, and especially with the difficulty of coming to term with the domestic constraint it seems to force on the characters in the final stages of the story.

It is fair to say that both Austen and Goethe invest the central phase of experimentations, mistakes, and theatrical confusion with a decisive formative import; but on the other hand, both are clearly concerned with setting firm boundaries to the transgression and to affirm that, among the range of options and variations presented, only one is the right and proper closure. But if this ambivalence makes of Austen's novel a defective *Bildungsroman*, then the *Lehrjahre*, the recognized prototype of the genre, is one too. Not only Fanny and other women 'apprentices', but also Wilhelm Meister and his comrades lose something of their individuality and freedom once they enter maturity. The libertarian space of the theatre must be done with, control has to be regained and characters are required to initiate a process of reform, concluded not with the storming of the Bastille but with the lawful acquisition, by marriage, of a splendid neoclassical mansion. The ultimate result of *Bildung* is thus a house whose limits fit perfectly the boundaries set by the self, a state of perfect congruence between desire and duty, personal value and social position.

How to accommodate personal freedom within the framework of an ordered and rational state of affairs, and, in broader terms, how to integrate change and temporal discontinuity with necessity and the universals, are the main questions that concern the philosophical thought of the time.³² An example of this preoccupation in the socio-political discourse is Wilhelm von Humboldt's essay now known as *Limits of State Action*, part of which appeared in Schiller's journal *Neue Thalia* in 1792. There Humboldt expounds his political theory, based on the recognition, shared by Goethe, of the need for non-violent political reforms and a fairer regulation of the relations between citizens and state. He also discusses education, developing views much indebted to Goethe's ideas, expressing the conviction that individual freedom should not be considered an end in itself, as by the American constitutionalists, but rather the condition of *Bildung*, that 'harmonious development of man's powers to a complete and consistent whole' which is 'the true

end of human beings'. Freedom contributes to *Bildung* by offering the learning subject 'a variety of situation':

Even the most free and self-reliant of men is thwarted and hindered in his development by uniformity of position. But as it is evident, on the one hand, that such a diversity is a constant result of freedom, and on the other, that there is a species of oppression which, without imposing restrictions on man himself, gives a peculiar impress of its own to surrounding circumstances; these two conditions, of freedom and variety of situation, may be regarded, in a certain sense, as one and the same.³³

In other words, liberty, understood not only in terms of freedom of movement and decision but also as an independence of mind not crushed by external influence, is desirable only as the way which leads to the attainment of *Bildung*, here indicating the end of the process and the status of *gebildeter Mensch*. Once this condition is reached, the individual is ready to accept the limitation of personal freedom that goes with the choice of one's situation and the adoption of a more steady and regular course of life, in the typical bourgeois fashion, through the choice of a profession and matrimony.

According to Nicholas Boyle, Humboldt's system implies that 'from being the purpose of liberty, "Bildung" would become the substitute for it'.³⁴ I would say instead that after the *Bildungs*-process is completed the *Bildungs*-condition replaces freedom, because, in the social thinking of Humboldt and Goethe, once the individual has freely determined where the boundaries of his being should lie, the need for freedom, and even the very concept of it, naturally subside. This is the meaning of the hasty matchmaking that concludes the *Lehrjahre* as well as *Mansfield Park* with the formation of unlikely couples (most evidently: Jarno and Lydie), and of the ruthless expulsion of all *personae non gratae* (the 'Magdalenes': Mariane, Mary, and Maria).

As is well known, these narrative solutions have provoked endless criticism of both novels, as especially the all-too-predictable marriage of Fanny and Edmund and the union of Wilhelm with the frigid Natalie fail to thrill the reader. It is easy to sympathize with the acting parties and their explosion of collective folly not least because Goethe and Austen do not underplay the attractiveness of the theatrical world and its capacity to reveal undercurrents of anger, discontent, envy, and sexual attraction that run through the social group and within the individual. In a famous essay of 1968, director Peter Brook talks of the 'dangerous electricity' created by the living event on the stage, of which regimes are instinctively wary, because it brings the audience to an intensified perception of the

rules that control their own daily lives.³⁵ At the same time as it challenges and unsettles the home, the experience of the theatre also represents an opportunity for characters to experiment with different possible roles and positions that jolt them out of an oppressive routine. Theatre forces them to reconsider accepted but unsatisfactory arrangements, and to make an effort to change such inequitable systems as Mansfield, the old Meister's house, and the Count's Court. As Maike Oergel observes, the conciliatory tendency that prevails in Goethe's ideals of human history and personal *Bildung* does not revoke those 'suggestions in the text that a solution to bourgeois emancipation must be found, that, in effect, only the *methods* of the French Revolution were wrong'.³⁶

But in Goethe and Austen's view, revolution must stay abroad but prompt reforms at home that do not compromise the foundations of the existing order. In conclusion, the puppet theatre, the resident company of the Schloß, and the theatricals in *Mansfield Park* are like the 'crevices and holes' Wilhelm talks of to Mariane, peep-holes from which another world can be glimpsed, so different from the regulated cosmos of the family home, a space where excitement and animation reign, yes, but alongside them the sinister spirit of subversion and chaos, and the polluting contagion of the political and theatrical revolutions that Goethe and Austen were anxious to keep at bay. I have tried to show that in order to represent all this, they choose the same symbol, theatre; and to signify the benign force that creates and maintains order they form the same idealized image of the country estate as an ideal domestic environment where the confluence of norm and desire, tradition and change can be effortlessly realized.

NOTES

- 1 Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World. The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 64 and 23.
- 2 See T. J. Reed, 'Revolution und Rücknahme: *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* im Kontext der Französischen Revolution', in *Goethe Jahrbuch* 107 (1990), 27–43; and Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, vol. 2: *Revolution and Renunciation (1790–1803)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 234.
- 3 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 'Venetianische Epigramme', in *Werke*, edited by Erich Trunz, 14 vols, (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982; 'Hamburger Ausgabe', abbreviated below as HA followed by volume and page number), I, 175. English translation by David Luke in Goethe, *Selected Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 114.

- 4 Giuliano Baioni, *Classicismo e rivoluzione. Goethe e la Rivoluzione francese* (Napoli: Guida, 1969), p. 141.
- 5 Myriam Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 219.
- 6 See Matthew Orville Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel. British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 7 On this widely discussed issue see the recent Paula Byrne, *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2002), pp. 151–176.
- 8 Goethe, 'Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre', HA VII, 246–249 (Bk. IV, Ch. 14).
- 9 Dieter Borchmeyer, *Höfische Gesellschaft und französische Revolution bei Goethe. Adliges und bürgerliches Wertsystem im Urteil der Weimarer Klassik* (Kronberg: Athenäum Verlag, 1977).
- 10 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 98.
- 11 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), edited by J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 224 and 151.
- 12 See Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1979), pp. 42–46.
- 13 Wolfgang Rothe, *Der politische Goethe. Dichter und Staatsdiener im deutschen Spätabolutismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), pp. 62–64.
- 14 Goethe, *Werke*, edited by Erich Schmidt, Bernhard Suphan et al., 143 vols (Weimar: Böhlau, 1887–1919; 'Weimarer Ausgabe'), XXXIII, 363. On morphology and natural growth see Dorothea Kuhn, *Typus und Metamorphose. Goethe-Studien* (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1988), pp. 188ff. On plant metaphors as expressions of Goethe's anthropological theory see Matthew Bell, *Goethe's Naturalistic Anthropology. Man and Other Plants* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), especially pp. 232–233.
- 15 On pre-museological collecting practices see, among others, Paul Grinke, *From Wunderkammer to Museum* (London: Quaritch, 2006). For an interesting discussion of the collection's role in the *Bildungsroman* see Peter McIsaac, 'The Museal Path to *Bildung*: Collecting, Exhibiting and Exchange in Stifter's *Der Nachsommer*', *German Life and Letters* 57 (2004), 268–289.
- 16 English translation by Thomas Carlyle, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels*, 2 vols, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), I, 21. All subsequent translations refer to this edition.
- 17 Burke, *Reflections*, p. 253; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Carlyle, 'French Revolution. A History', in *Works*, 30 vols, edited by H. D. Traill (London: Chapman & Hall, 1896–1901), II, 194–195.
- 18 See Gloria Flaherty, 'The Stage-Struck Wilhelm Meister and 18th-Century Psychiatric Medicine', *MLN* 101 (1986), 493–515; and Robert D. Tobin, *Doctor's Orders, Goethe and Enlightenment Thought* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2001), pp. 129–143.
- 19 See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005), especially pp. 252ff. On the Evangelical undertones to Fanny's unwillingness to act see Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, pp. 231–233; and Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*, p. 145.

- 20 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 144 and 96.
- 21 The billiard-room had been a common appendage of aristocratic mansions since 1700 and became the symbol of a leisurely upper-class lifestyle. Indicatively, the purchase of a billiard table for the White House in 1825 caused an outbreak of public anger at what was deemed the President's elitism and extravagance. See Edwin A. Miles, 'President Adams' Billiard Table', *The New England Quarterly* 45 (1972), 31–43.
- 22 Michael Karounous also interprets the moving of objects and furniture as a figure for Revolution in 'Ordination and Revolution in *Mansfield Park*', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 44 (2004), 715–736 (p. 719).
- 23 Humphry Trevelyan and Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Goethe and the Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 189–190.
- 24 Jane V. Curran, *Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship. A Reader's Commentary* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002), pp. 89–90.
- 25 David Roberts, *The Indirections of Desire. Hamlet in Goethe's 'Wilhelm Meister'* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1980), p. 21.
- 26 Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate. A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 57.
- 27 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 167. See also Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), especially pp. 89–91.
- 28 Emphasis added.
- 29 Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 'The Boundaries of *Mansfield Park*', in *Representations* 7 (1984), 133–152 (pp. 141 and 147).
- 30 Penny Gay, *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 117.
- 31 Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 53.
- 32 See Maike Oergel, *Culture and Identity. Historicity in German Literature and Thought, 1770–1815* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006).
- 33 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen* (1851), English translation by Joseph Coulthard, *The Sphere and Duties of Government* (London: John Chapman, 1854), p. 11.
- 34 Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, vol. 2, p. 31.
- 35 Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968), p. 99.
- 36 Oergel, *Culture and Identity*, p. 213.